

June 16, 2009 - Internet Important for Area Politicians

Valley Independent

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Tuesday, June 16,
2009

When U.S. Rep. John Murtha was first elected to Congress in 1974, the preferred method of communication was traditional mail.

While the Johnstown Democrat's offices still receive a large number of handwritten and typed letters, today his office receives 10 times as many e-mails.

Murtha is a big proponent of using every tool and resource available to connect with constituents, and his office is always exploring new means of communication, spokesman Matt Mazonkey said.

"The Internet plays a large role in both reaching out to constituents and being accessible to their suggestions and needs," said Mazonkey, responding to a request for comment that was e-mailed to him on his Blackberry cellular telephone.

"This doesn't mean that we should abandon the traditional mail, phone, and fax system of communication, but Web sites, e-mail, electronic newsletters, YouTube, Facebook, etc. compliment and expand on what was available to us in the past."

The social networking site Facebook.com, founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, allows users to create profiles and "friend" others.

Twitter.com was created in 2006 by 32-year-old programmer Jack Dorsey. The "micro-blogging" service allows users to answer the question, "What are you doing?" in 140 characters or less.

The congressman's Web site - www.murtha.house.gov - has up-to-date information on assistance with federal agencies, issues before Congress and press releases, for example.

"Through our Web site, you can also access YouTube videos of Congressman Murtha speaking on the floor of the House and at public forums," Mazonkey said.

"We also started e-mailing a quarterly electronic newsletter this year to inform constituents about issues and legislation impacting our communities. You can sign up to receive this newsletter by visiting our Web site."

Murtha also has a Facebook page through his campaign office.

State Rep. R. Ted Harhai, D-Monessen, said he does not use Facebook or Twitter. He said the Democratic press office "blasts" e-mail to constituents on specific issues.

"I have people e-mail me directly, because it allows them to get their opinions known," Harhai said. "But it adds a couple

of hours to each day answering e-mails."

Harhai said his office still receives countless telephone calls and letters from constituents, many whom do not have computers.

For his campaign work, Harhai purchased a laptop this year. That computer is used to keep campaign issues separate from his legislative work. He also has a campaign Web site, developed for him by a private firm he hired.

"I don't have the time to go on Facebook and Twitter," Harhai said. "I've looked on Facebook and Twitter. I've seen a lot of things I don't like."

State Rep. Pete Daley, D-California, said his legislative Web site is a useful tool for providing information.

"We have the ability for people to contact us through the e-mail," Daley said. "We respond back to e-mails. A tremendous amount of e-mails come to us."

Daley said he does not utilize Facebook or Twitter.

Despite the advancement of electronic media, there is one form of communication that is most personal, Mazonkey noted.

"Congressman Murtha also realizes that many people would rather meet face-to-face with a staff member instead of sending a letter or making a phone call," Mazonkey said.

"That being said, our office staffs a dozen outreach offices throughout the 12th district to make it convenient for constituents to meet with a professional staff member."